

Shinsengumi in Wonderland

by Saleboat

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Summary: Chizuru finds herself lost in a strange world. Draws heavily from Lewis Carroll's "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" and "Through the Looking Glass."

1. Chapter 1

It was a hot afternoon. It was the kind of afternoon that makes a person want to curl up beneath a shaded tree and sleep the day away. _But that certainly wouldn't do_, Chizuru thought to herself. _I can't just take a nap when everyone else is busy_.

So the young woman stood up from beneath the tree and wiped the dirt off her hakama. _ But what _can_ I _do?_ she wondered. She had already helped clean the headquarters and brought tea to everyone. While she knew those were minor tasks, she took some comfort in that those were things she _could_ do. _Perhaps someone might need me to run an errand?_ she thought. And yet, wouldn't they ask her if they needed her for that? _Perhaps someone needs help with supper? It is certainly worth looking into._

Within the main compound she wondered the corridors as she headed for the kitchen hoping to run into someone who might need help along the way. As she neared the kitchen her spirits lifted at the smell of dinner cooking. She had been afraid she might have arrived before preparations began and the smell of soy and fish told her otherwise; but when she entered it was the most curious thing. Rice was boiling over a fire, there was fish on a grill, and a radish lay half chopped on a cutting board, and yet, there was no one boiling the rice, grilling the fish, or cutting the radish. She stood alone in an empty kitchen.

"Um, excuse me. Is anyone here?" she called out. But no one answered. "Hello?" she called out again, this time poking her head out of the kitchen. _That's odd_, she thought, _who would leave the kitchen unattended? _She moved over to the neglected fish, checking to see

how it was coming along. It had not been over the fire for very long. _Surely whoever was cooking must have stepped out for just a moment? I'll just watch it until they come back._ But by the time the fish and the rice were cooked whoever was supposed to be cooking had not returned.

"I should probably go look for someone," Chizuru stated, feeling somewhat unnerved from the quiet in the kitchen. "It seems unlikely that someone would forget they're cooking, but maybe something came up that prevented whoever was cooking from returning?" But as she began wondering the corridors the silence persisted. "I wonder where everyone is?" she peered into a room, hoping to see some sign of life. "If something happened there would have been more of a commotion." _And even if there was something going on I should have run into someone by now_. Down another hall and all was quiet. "Then again, I don't think I ran into anyone when I was on my way to the kitchen either." That thought disturbed her. Her head became flooded with unanswered questions. How long had she been left alone? Where had everyone gone? Why was no one left on reserve? She ran through the remaining halls, panicked, checking every room. No one was left, not the captains or the rank-and-file. Even the furies were missing.

"What's going on? I know they don't have to tell me where they're going but surelyâ€¦!" She shook her head. "No, something's not right. If something happened they would have left soldiers to guard the headquarters and if they had to leave they would have taken their things with them. But what could have happened?"

Chizuru leaned against the wall as though the wooden support might offer her some comfort. As she considered her next move, she heard the sound of hurried footsteps from around the corner.

Someone is here! she thought, quite elated. She sped across the hall, eager to see a familiar face. _I wonderâ€¦!_ "Oof!" she exclaimed, as she ran into the form that was hurrying around the corner. Steady hands grabbed her, catching her before she fell. "I'm sorâ€¦!" she began, trailing off when she caught sight of the one who held her steady. "Saiâ€¦to?" The man before her looked very much like Saito, with his familiar dark hair and blue eyes, yet there was something distinctly different about him. His clothes were not different, not really. While he still wore his white scarf and donned the Shinsengumi blue, his clothing did seem more refined. And there was one thing that was more peculiar still. Atop his head were two floppy ears that very much resembled that of a snow rabbit.

The man looked at her, betraying no emotion. "Excuse me," he stated, letting her go and walking past her.

"Um, Saito?" Chizuru repeated.

He turned to look at her, "Is there something you needed miss?"

"Miss? Saito, what's going on? Where is everyone? Andâ€¦ and you're earsâ€¦!"

"I am sorry miss, but I do not have the time to answer your questions." He stated, turning to leave.

"Please wait! Something's not right, it's like everyone has disappeared!"

"I have not seen anyone else here. I do not see how anyone could have disappeared if they were not here to begin with."

"Huh? Saito are you okay? This is the headquarters of the Shinsengumi. There should be people here."

"Shinsengumi? Not here."

"But--"

"I must be going," he stated, with only the slightest hint of agitation."

"Are you late for something?" Chizuru asked, wondering if Saito's reason for acting so strangely was because there was something else on his mind.

"I am never late. Punctuality is very important, but I must be going." He turned to leave. "If it is the Shinsengumi you seek, I suggest you follow me, but you must keep up. I will not slow for you," he added, almost as an afterthought.

Chizuru nodded and followed the man through the halls of the Shinsengumi headquarters. So quick was he that several times she thought she lost him only for him to reappear as she turned another corner. Round and round they went. Chizuru lost count of the halls they ran through. With each new corridor Saito seemed to increase his speed. It was not until her breathing became heavy that she realized she was quite lost. This struck her as odd, seeing as she had lived in this building for quite some time now. The headquarters had never seemed quite so much like a labyrinth before.

By now she had to sprint just to keep Saito in sight. _I wonder how much longer until we find the Shinsengumi?_ she thought as she realized she could not keep up this brisk pace for much longer.

But before she could ask her question she realized she had lost track of Saito.

"Oh!" she cried when she concluded that Saito was truly gone. "But he really was in a hurry, so I guess I can't complain!" she trailed, not sure what to do now that the only person she could find was gone. _But he wasn't quite right_, she noted. He had spoken to her as though they had never met and this revelation struck her as quite odd. He also seemed quite unconcerned that everyone had disappeared. This was very un-Saito-like. "And then there was his ears," she mumbled. "I'm certain he never had those before."

Chizuru slumped against a wall, quite unsure as to what to do now. Catching her breath, she tried to get a sense of where she was within the headquarters. While Saito may have left her, she was pretty sure she was close to the exit. That is, if the exit was still where it used to be. At this point, she would not be surprised if it wasn't.

As she arrived at the end of the hallway she found herself back in the kitchen rather than the exit. _A cup of tea might do me some

good_, she thought, preparing water to boil. When the water was comfortably set she proceeded to search for a clean cup. She found one to her liking and placed it on the counter. She then noticed that the kitchen was not quite as she left it. Atop the counter was a single cube of tofu on a plate with a piece of parchment underneath with the words "Eat Me" written on it. Next to the tofu was a steaming cup of tea and a piece of parchment with the words "Drink Me."

How bizarre, she thought. Who would go through the trouble to make such a display? While she was certain quite thirsty she figured drinking the tea would be impolite as she doubted the tea was meant for her. The cube of tofu looked particularly odd to her. It seemed almost to be heaving up and down in the middle as though it was breathing. Somewhat unnerved by the idea of a moving cube of tofu, she picked up a chopstick and proceeded to poke it. The tofu did not seem to appreciate that.

"Don't you know," said the cube of tofu, "It's rather impolite to play with your food."

"What!" Chizuru exclaimed, dropping the chopstick. "It talks!"

"Of course _it_ talks," said the tofu, rather irritated. "You don't see me making a fuss about _you_ talking now, do you?"

"But-"

"No buts, it's really not that big of a deal. Now are you going to eat me or not?"

"I- I can't just eat you!"

"Well fine," said the tofu, somewhat hurt. "You weren't worth my time anyway." The cube of tofu proceeded to pop four legs out of its sides and walked towards the exit. "Are you coming?"

"Me?" Chizuru pointed to herself.

"No, not you, tea."

"I'm coming!" came a rather chipper reply from the counter. Chizuru looked at the table and saw the tea cup grow a pair of legs and waddle off the counter, tea splashing out as it moved.

It took Chizuru a moment to process what she had seen. It wasn't everyday one encountered food that has a mind of its own. Once she felt a bit calmer she found that she no longer had a desire for tea and removed the water from the fire. When this was done she decided to continue her search for the exit.

Chizuru was not entirely sure how to find an exit that was seemingly lost. She considered her options, and decided to follow the tea trail that had spilt from the talking tea cup. The trail itself lasted quite awhile, much longer than she would have expected considering the size of the cup and the amount of tea that should have been in it. When the trail ended, she found herself in front of a door that looked remarkably like the exit. But as she opened the door, she found that what was on the other side was not as it should.

What Chizuru saw was not the streets of Kyoto, but a forest of wonders. There were trees to be sure, but they were not like any trees she had seen before. The trees reached high above her with wood as smooth as bamboo and leaves that bloomed out like grassy parasols. She could see a river in the distance, but it looked as though it had a slow, viscous quality about it. It seemed to slosh about rather than run in any particular direction. She could hear the buzzing of flies and chirping of birds, but within the sounds of familiarity were animal cries she had never heard before.

I must be dreaming, she thought. "This certainly can't be real.

"Are you sure about that?" asked another.

Chizuru spun around. "Okita?" she asked. While she could not see him, that voice was unmistakably his.

I've never been called that before," said the voice.

Chizuru spun around again, searching for the voice. "Where are you?"

"I'm right here, of course," he said.

"I don't see you."

"Perhaps you aren't truly looking?" he replied.

It was an odd thing, which happened next. He tapped her on the shoulder, but when she turned around to see him, he still was not there. "I still don't see you," she said, almost pleading.

"Or maybe you are trying too hard?"

Absurd, Chizuru thought. But what did she have to lose? She sat down on the grassy floor and waited for him to decide to show himself. No more than a minute passed before he seemed to appear from behind her.

"I thought that might be the case," he said. What she saw next certainly looked like Okita, but like the forest before her, there was something about him that wasn't quite right. He stood before her dressed as she would have expected, but his haori was colored in stripes of white and Shinsengumi blue. Atop his head were ears that resembled a cat. Behind him swished a rather long tail that matched the ears remarkably. "I've always found it easier to see myself when I don't try too hard." The smile he gave her was rather eerie.

Chizuru sprang to her feet. "Okita, everything's wrong! The Shinsengumi are missing, the headquarters are a labyrinth, Saito doesn't seem to remember anything, there's talking tofu, and there's a forest here instead of Kyoto!" she huffed all at once.

"That's the second time, you called me that. Do you like the name Okita? Do you find it fascinating? I certainly do."

"What- Okita no- I meanâ€¦, it's justâ€¦ that's your name."

"I'm rather glad you told me then, I hadn't a clue."

Chizuru looked at him, not sure if she should be taking him seriously. His smiling face betrayed nothing. "Um, Okita, what's going on?"

"Going on," he stated, almost as though he was trying to see how to words fit. "Going on, going down, going south, going under, going--"

"Okita!"

"Yes?"

"I'm very confused."

"Very Confused? What an odd choice for a name."

"What are you talking about, I'm Chizuru?"

"Chizuru? Very Confused? Well, which one is it?"

"Both."

"So you have two names as well. Well, Very Confused Chizuru, I'm the Cheshire Cat. At least, I thought I was the Cheshire Cat until you called me Okita." The man smiled, his tail swaying back and forth.

"Huh?" Chizuru said, unsure of what to make of the man's words. He certainly looked like Okita, but with the missing Shinsengumi, Saito's strange behavior (and ears!), and the strange forest that used to be Kyoto how could she really be sure of anything. Perhaps nothing was as it seems?

"You'veâ€| really never seen me before, have you?" she asked.

"It's hard to say, really," he stated. As he stared off to the side Chizuru realized that he never seemed to stop smiling. "I undoubtedly do not remember seeing you before, but that surely does not mean that I haven't seen you before."

Chizuru felt her stomach drop. This isn't right. But then again, she had indisputably seen many strange things since she had begun staying with the Shinsengumi, but surely this was the most bizarre. She did not know whether or not this was the Okita she knew, but he did not seem to think he was.

"I don't know what to do," she stated.

"Then maybe you shouldn't do anything," Not-Okita suggested.

"I must do something."

"Why?"

"I- I just can't sit here and hope everything will be okay. The Shinsengumi have done a lot for me. I don't really know what I can do to help them, but if there's something I can do, I want to do it."

"Then what will you do?"

Chizuru took a deep breath. "I need to find the Shinsengumi," she decided.

"The Shinsengumi? Then I suggest you speak with the queen?"

"The queen?"

"Yes, the Queen of Hearts. Though I would be careful. They say the queen's a demon who forces the insolent to choose between seppuku and being experimented on. And I'd also warn you, the queen finds many to be of an insolent nature."

"Thank you!" Chizuru said, bowing slightly.

"Yes, I'll be sure to watch if you decide to commit seppuku," he beamed, with a little too much enthusiasm.

Chizuru gulped. "Do you know where I can find the queen?" she asked, though she honestly was not sure she wanted to find this queen.

"Well, I usually go right. I find that if I go right, I can't possibly go wrong." Not-Okita took his hand, and used it like a cat's paw to clean his face. "Then again, I suppose it doesn't really matter. All roads lead to your destination."

Before Chizuru could ask him what he meant, Not-Okita walked behind her. When Chizuru turned to look at him, he had seemingly vanished.

Chizuru felt very alone. The Okita who fashioned himself as the Cheshire Cat may not have been the man she knew, but his presence was still reassuring. She wondered if the Saito she saw was a different Saito as well. _I really wish I knew what to do_, she thought. But she knew worrying about things she didn't understand wouldn't solve anything. The only thing she could do was try to find the real Shinsengumi. "But what if the Shinsengumi Okita mentioned isn't the real Shinsengumi?" No. That was another useless thing to think about. She had to reach the queen and see for herself.

2. Chapter 2

After the Cheshire Cat vanished, it took Chizuru quite some time to decide how to proceed as there was no main road. Eventually, she chose to take the odd man's advice and headed towards the right.

Her direction took her to one side of the forest. She was hesitant, at first, to wonder through unknown woods, but as she picked through the trees she found a small, but warn trail. _I might as well follow this_, she thought. _This way is as good as any and it's better to follow a trail then wonder aimlessly_.

The trail snaked around quite a bit and Chizuru often wondered if she was walking in circles. Time seemed to be moving slowly. Every time Chizuru looked towards the sun it seemed to have hardly moved, yet she felt like she had been walking for hours. She challenged herself

to not look at the sun until she walked what she guessed to be about four miles hoping to pass the time a bit quicker. But when she looked at the sun again it seemed to have moved in a different direction. _Odd_, she thought. She walked another mile and looking up at the sun it seemed to have moved in yet another direction. She tried this a third time and the sun changed direction once more. "I'm beginning to think the sun moves in a square. It's a wonder anyone can tell direction here."

"Or perhaps it is you who is walking in a square," said a voice that sounded both close and far at the same time.

Chizuru looked around to find who the voice belonged to and saw a crouched figure a little ways off to the left of her hidden heavily with a grassy umbrella.

"I was trying to account for that," she said, walking towards the figure.

"It's not as easy as it looks. The sun tends to do as it pleases. I find it rather futile to speculate on the mind of the sun." While the man was clearly speaking to her, he seemed almost detached from the conversation.

When she approached the figure she found, to her surprise, what appeared to be Amagiri lounging beneath the grass umbrella. He seemed to be playing shogi, which he must have found more interesting than her as he never looked up from the board.

Chizuru was not accustomed to running into Amagiri, or other demons from his clan without being kidnapped and thus her first instinct was to run. After further consideration she remembered that nothing here was quite right and even if she did run, he could probably catch her anyway.

On closer inspection she figured the man was probably not Amagiri. In his left hand was a long red pipe. He was dressed in a bright yellow kimono and a green haori. There were blue circles on each of the sleeves of this haori quite similar to the outfit she was used to seeing him in. While this was a rather odd outfit for one to chose to wear, what truly separated him from the demon who followed Kazama was two antennae sprouting from his forehead.

"My name is Chizuru," she said, introducing herself.

"I never asked you for your name," the man replied, moving a piece on the board. While Chizuru was much closer to the man then she was before she noted that his voice still retained the quality of being both near and far at the same time. "Though I suppose it doesn't hurt to know."

"May I ask who you are?"

"You may."

When it became evident the man was not going to say anything else she asked, "What is your name?"

"Caterpillar." He took a puff from his pipe, but when he released his breath, he blew out no smoke.

Chizuru looked at the Shogi board. She had always thought the game was usually played with two people. "Who are you playing against?"

"Myself."

"Doesn't that make it rather easy to win?"

"Not in the least. I cannot think of a more challenging opponent than myself."

"But won't you always know what you are going to play next?"

"Not if I do not tell myself what I am about to play. That would be cheating."

Chizuru was very confused. She decided it may be best to discontinue the small talk and go straight to business. "I am trying to find the Shinsengumi," she paused, waiting to see if he would respond. "Do you know where I can find them?"

"I do not."

"Do you know someone who can help me?"

"It is impossible."

"Impossible? Why?"

"Because you have not stated what it is you need help with. It is absurd to ask if I know someone who can help if I do not know in what way it is you are requiring help."

"But Iâ€¦" Chizuru was beginning to get quite frustrated. It seemed that this Caterpillar was not an easy person to talk to. "Then, do you know someone who can help me find the Shinsengumi, or at least point me in the right direction."

Caterpillar moved another piece on the board. "I do not. _ I_ do not know the location and I cannot begin to speculate what is on the minds of others. Truly, it is rather illogical to ask me questions about other persons' minds when they are not my own."

This is getting nowhere, Chizuru thought. "May I ask you another question?"

"Yes."

"Why do you speak like that?"

"Like what?"

"Literally. Or is it specifically?"

"Properly."

"Ok, why do you speak so properly?"

"Because it is the proper thing to do. Would you have me speak

improperly?"

"Well, no." She paused, considering how to ask her next question. She decided that much more of any conversation with this man would be entirely useless. "Can you at least direct me to a main road? I'm not sure that I will be able to find my way using the path that I was taking."

"I can."

"Will you?"

Without looking at her he stated, "Follow me."

Chizuru waited for him to stand, but after several minutes she realized that he probably was not going to move after all. "Um, Caterpillar. You said to follow youâ€¦"

"No, I said 'follow me.'"

"I know, butâ€¦ you're not moving?"

"Why would I need to move?"

"But-"

Using his pipe, Not-Amagiri pointed towards the ground. "Follow me."

Chizuru looked down. By her feet and trailing off into the distance were the words "Follow" and "Me" stamped into the ground like a series of footprints.

I don't think those words were there before, Chizuru thought. Yet at this point, she was hardly surprised. She bowed to Not-Amagiri, "Thank you."

Without bothering to acknowledge her courtesy, Caterpillar continued his game.

Chizuru followed to word trail for quite some time. It was hard going, as she was not following any particular beaten path, but the words trail remained quite visible even on the toughest of terrain. She found it odd that she became neither tired, hungry, nor thirsty. _Perhaps people here do not to eat or drink so often_?" she wondered. She thought it was equally possible that she had not become tired because the sun had not yet decided set. _A ridiculous notion_, she would have thought had she been in her own world. But by now she was becoming quite accustomed to absurdities and strangeness. Someone could tell her that the sky is usually red, but sometimes green and she'd probably believe them. How long would she go before she ceased to use logic at all?

As Chizuru considered this, she realized the word trail was beginning to grow faint. Startled by the change she began moving more rapidly as though in doing so she could will the words into being. Yet the further she walked, the lighter the words became. By the time the words were gone completely, she reached another path. She breathed deeply, quite happy that she found the road before the word trail had faded completely. It occurred to her then that perhaps the trail had

faded because she was approaching this road.

The road looked to be nothing more than a wide dirt path, but it was clearly more traveled than anything she had come across until now. When she walked on it she found that there seemed to be a bounce to her step. It was a bit difficult to get used to, but she soon found herself walking a bit quicker and more enjoyably. Her humor was short lived, however, for she soon heard a loud pop after which the ground seemed to almost deflate beneath her leaving her with the hard ground she had expected to find.

The dirt path took Chizuru in a much straighter line than the first trail she took. It was not long until she found the trees waning into blue-green grassy hills. As she past the last of the trees she saw what appeared to be smoke billowing up behind a hill. She suspected it must be coming from a camp fire from the size of it, but it had an odd syrupy quality to it that normal smoke certainly shouldn't have.

Chizuru decided to walk towards the smoke, hoping that it truly was from a camp fire. Perhaps whomever the fire belonged to would be able to direct her to the Shinsengumi?

As she neared the source of the fire she began to hear what sounded like voices. Perhaps two voices. By the time she neared the top of the hill, she was fairly certain there were not only two voices, but two voices that sounded remarkably familiar. When she reached the top of the hill she saw two very familiar men not far from where she stood. Only yards before her were Harada and Nagakura dancing arm-in-arm around a camp fire singing a bawdy song about tea houses and courtesans. They appeared to be sharing one outfit between the two of them. Nagakura wore only a blue top that just barely reached his knees and opened wide at the chest while Harada wore nothing but a pair of low set white hakama, though his stomach was covered by binding. As they danced in circles they passed between them a large jug. From them smell blowing in her direction, it was probably alcohol.

"Um, excuse me," Chizuru said as she reached the camp fire.

The two men stopped mid step and mid lyric. "Ah, what do we have here?" asked the man who looked like Harada.

"It looks kind of like a bird," said Nagakura.

Harada shook his head, "More like a pretty little flower."

"A flower? That isn't very manly."

"Neither is a bird."

"It's manlier than a flower."

"But it resembles Alice a bit, don't you think?"

"More like the Knave of Hearts."

"The Knave of Hearts? Well, I suppose the Knave is more manly than a bird. Though I hardly know how she would feel at being called manly," Harada stated, pointing at Chizuru.

"Then we'll just have to ask him."

Both men turned to look at Chizuru. "Well, are you a flower or a bird," Harada asked.

"Or the Knave or Alice?" questioned Nagakura.

Chizuru hesitated. "Umâ€¦ I'm Chizuru."

"Chizuru? I've never heard of a Chizuru before," Harada puzzled.

"I'm a woman."

Nagakura looked shocked. "Then it's not a bird?"

"Yes, I suppose it's a bit tall to be a flower," Harada mused.

"And it's not dressed right to be the Knave," Nagakura stated.

"Or Alice," Harada agreed.

Chizuru was baffled. What an odd thing, to be surprised that she was neither a bird nor a flower. Shouldn't it have been clear that she was a human? And who was this Knave of Hearts and Alice. "Is it really that strange?" she asked. "Are you not human too?"

Harada and Nagakura looked at each other. "I've never wondered," Nagakura frowned.

Harada shrugged. "We are who we are."

"And who would that be?"

Nagakura pointed at himself, "I'm Tweedle Dee."

"And I'm Tweedle Dum." Harada stated. "We're twins."

Nagakura put his arm over Harada's shoulders. "Identical twins, can't you tell?"

"Well, I suppose you do look a little alike," Chizuru said politely.

The two men looked at each other. "Nah," Nagakura grinned. "We don't look anything alike."

"I thought you said you were identical?" Chizuru questioned.

Harada dislodged himself from Nagakura. "We don't even have the same parents, but we do have twin spirits."

"Twin spirits?"

"That's right," Nagakura chimed in. "Our spirits are identical, except when they're not."

"But that's hardly why you're here, no?" Harada asked.

"I'm looking for the Shinsengumi," she stammered, yet as soon as the words left her mouth Nagakura became quite agitated.

"Shh!" Nagakura hissed, crouching in front of Chizuru with his index finger over his lips. "Never mention the Shinsengumi!"

"The what?" Harada asked, bending down near Nagakura. "Did you say Shinsengumi?"

"No, no she didn't."

"Why would you want to find them?" Harada asked, crestfallen.

"Butâ€¦ Iâ€¦" Chizuru mumbled.

Nagakura sighed. "Now you got him started." He walked back over to the camp fire and sat down. "You might as well get comfortable too, this could take awhile."

Chizuru nodded and sat near Nagakura. She felt quite bewildered at the level of energy possessed by these two men. She could hardly get a word in let alone a thought.

Harada unwound the binding covering his stomach revealing a deep horizontal scar. "Tweedle Dee and I were a part of the Shinsengumi," he began. "Though that was quite some time ago. The King of Hearts and Tweedle Dee did not quite see eye-to-eye and that was a rather awkward position for me as I had no quarrel with the King. But Tweedle Dee is my twin so I had little choice but to take his side. Now, this would have been all well and fine if the Queen was taken to let those who wished to leave go, but one does not simply leave the Shinsengumi under the Queen's watch. The only obvious choice was to make the Queen mad, that way the Queen would be forced to make us commit seppuku or drink the Hatter's tea. So I stole the Queen's tart, causing quite a bit of anger. I chose seppuku over the Hatter's tea, as I am not very fond of tea. Though, the cut I made was far too shallow and to the dismay of the Queen I was still very much alive. But the Duchess felt rather sorry for me, and convinced the Queen to let the both of us go. The Duchess has rather a way with words and it probably helped that the Queen had become quite taken with the Duchess's servant. But that is another tale for another time." Finishing his story, Harada breathed deeply as though this was the first breath he took since he started his story. Chizuru suspected it might have been.

Chizuru was quite confused by Not-Harada's story. With the way Not-Nagakura ranted she had assumed it would take him a good deal longer to tell his tale. It was also a very un-Harada like story to tell. That aside, she rather wondered what a tart was and what was so bad about Hatter's tea. And this Duchess character. She must be quite a woman to sway the Queen. But as Harada re-wrapped his stomach, she figured she really should say something. "That was quite the tale, though it really wasn't all that long," she noted.

"It varies in length depending on his mood and how drunk he is," Nagakura whispered.

"I rather like his stories," whispered another voice in her other ear.

Recognizing the voice she turned to see if the voice's owner was truly there, though she was not surprised when she saw no one. "Okier, Cheshire Cat, is that you?"

"Indeed, can you not see me?"

"Of course we can't," snapped Nagakura.

"Cheshire Cat, it's not very polite to speak when you are invisible," Harada chided.

"I apologize. I don't make a habit of looking at myself, so I hardly realize that others cannot see me," Okita relented, though Chizuru could practically hear his smile.

"Well then, are you going to show yourself," Harada asked, though he received no response. "Cheshire Cat, it is also rude to not answer a question when someone asks one of you."

"So sorry," Okita's voice replied. "But you did say that it was impolite to speak if I was not visible and I do not really feel like showing myself at the moment. It's far too much work."

"Well, I suppose it would be even ruder to pretend you're not here now that we know you are here, even if we can't see you," decided Nagakura.

"I am so glad that you have decided to acknowledge my existence," Okita said, rather dryly. Somehow, Chizuru didn't think he really cared. "As far as existences go, I'm rather fond of mind."

"Oh, it's quite good to be fond of one's existence," Nagakura agreed. "I know I am rather fond of my own."

Harada nodded. "I suppose that means I must be fond of my own."

"You think so?" asked Okita.

"Well yes. As Tweedle Dee and I share an existence, if one is fond of our existence, it follows that the other will as well."

Chizuru found it difficult to follow their chain of logic. It seemed to be utter nonsense, in her opinion.

Okita tilted his head to the side. "But what if you were not fond of your existence? Would it then follow that he also not be fond? By your logic you cannot hold a different opinion then Tweedle Dee and surely you must have disagreed on something."

"Perhaps," Harada acknowledged. "We disagree rather often. But it may matter more who was either fond or not fond first. Or perhaps it only matters sometimes. You see, we are not always identical."

"I'm not sure I quite follow," Nagakura stated, mirroring Chizuru's confusion. "Besides, does it really matter who is fond of who?"

"Not really," Okita's voice gleaned. Though in Chizuru's opinion, he almost sounded like he was purring. "What do you think Miss Very Confused."

"Me?" asked Chizuru.

"Why yes, I hardly know anyone as confused as you."

"Well, Iâ€¦ I don't really know. This is all so confusing."

"Yes, I rather thought you might say something like that. I think you may be trying to hard again. You may be overworking that little brain of yours. You may want to try sleeping on it, though I'd be careful. Some thoughts make a rather sharp bed."

"But I really need to find the Shin- er, I need to find those people I said I needed to find before."

"You could try talking to Hatter," Nagakura suggested. "He seems to know a little bit about everything there is to know."

"And some things about everything there isn't to know," Harada added.

"He also knows a bit about nothing, but don't let that stop you," Okita's voice smiled.

"Do you know where I can find this Hatter?"

"You should be able to find him if you continue on this road," Harada suggested. "This road has a tendency to lead you to your destination."

"Yup," Nagakura agreed, "except when it doesn't."

Chizuru was not that surprised with this answer. By now she had heard stranger things. "Do you know how long it will take me to reach Hatter?"

"Oh, somewhere between now and then, though I'd imagine a might closer to then," Okita entertained.

Chizuru felt that she had probably gotten as much information from the three of them as she was going to get. "Thank you for your hospitality!" Chizuru bowed. The three smiled back and continued their conversations as though she had never been there at all.

As Chizuru made her way down the hill, her thoughts grew dark. She began to realize how acutely alone she felt. There were faces she recognized, but they hardly recognized her. It was a very painful feeling. Being with the three of them reminded her of everything she was missing, even before everything went haywire. She was in a strange place where she understood so little of the world around her. She felt very much like an outsider. It was a feeling she had become quite accustomed too, but had begun to forget about as her days with the Shinsengumi became routine. She wondered if she would ever feel like she belonged or if that was something lost to her the day she discovered she was a demon. It was a deep sadness that she hadn't before allowed herself to fully acknowledge. Chizuru sank to the ground and cried.

Chizuru was unsure how long she had sat on the grass before her tears stopped. It was not the most glamorous thing she could have done, but she felt the better for it and she was quite ready to continue her journey.

And continue her journey she did, down the hill and up another. She thought it looked as though it would be quicker to walk around the hills then over them, but experience in this odd place had taught her that looks can be quite deceiving. So follow the path she did and she soon found that the hills were not nearly as tall to walk over as they looked. It was not long until the end of the hills brought her to what looked like the outskirts of a large village.

Chizuru was quite happy to see something as familiar as a village; however, her delight was short lived. When she entered the village proper she did not see people as she had expected, but rather a large variety of animals going about their business as villagers do. There were all sorts of animals- mice, rabbits, birds, cats, dogs- and none took any more than a passing interest in Chizuru as they continued on their business. A fox walked down the street pushing a wagon filled with cabbages. A hawk swept the dirt off a store front while two raccoons seemed to be fixing the side of the building with a hammer and nails. Chizuru felt that this was by far the strangest thing she had seen yet.

Chizuru thought it best to not trouble any of the villagers and decided to continue through the village without conversing. She was not quite sure how to start a conversation with a fox and since they didn't seem particularly interested in her, she figured there would be no harm in simply passing through.

As Chizuru passed through the center of the town she came across a ramen cart. She would have thought nothing of it had she not realized that there was an actual person eating at the shop, and one she recognized to boot.

"Heisuke?" she asked, walking towards the cart.

"Huh? Are you talking to me?" asked the one who looked like Heisuke with a mouth full of multicolored noodles.

"Um, yes. Sorry." Chizuru mumbled. "You just look like someone I know." She was not particularly surprised when Heisuke didn't recognize her, but she had still hoped.

"He actually gets that a lot, so I wouldn't feel bad about it," said another.

Chizuru walked closer to the ramen cart to get a better view. As she thought, the man sitting in front of the cart bared a resemblance to Heisuke, though this version donned a necklace of brightly colored feathers. Behind the counter was another person whom, to Chizuru's surprise, looked entirely too much like the demon Shiranui. He too wore a necklace of feathers.

"Are you going to order something, or just passing through?" asked Shiranui.

Chizuru looked over at the bowl Heisuke was eating from. She was

pretty sure ramen was not supposed to come in every color of the rainbow. "Just passing through."

"Are you sure," began Heisuke. "It's really good!"

"We have red bean ramen, green tea ramen, mochi ramen, and taro ramen."

"Um, thank you. But, I'm afraid I probably don't have anything to pay for it with," Chizuru said, figuring whatever money she had probably wouldn't be of any value here. Of which she was rather glad for, as the thought of any of his ramen recipes made her stomach churn.

"You're loss," Heisuke muttered through a bite of noodles. "By the way, I'm the Lory and this man over here is the Dodo," he finished, pointing at Shiranui rather rudely with his chopsticks.

"I'm Chizuru," she bowed. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"I don't think I've ever met a Chizuru before," Heisuke said.

I seem to be getting that a lot. "Chizuru is my name. I'm a woman."

"Then why didn't you say so?" asked Heisuke."

"But I-"

"He's right," began Shiranui. "You're supposed to introduce yourself properly when meeting a new person."

"I'm sorry," muttered a flustered Chizuru. "I thought I had when I told you my name."

Heisuke shook his head. "It's only a name if it _names_ you. How else are we supposed to know what you are if you don't tell us?"

"I never thought about it that way."

"It really is important to let others know what you are," said Shiranui. Otherwise, it could complicate things. Would you know I was a dodo or he was a lory if we didn't say so?"

"Probably not," Chizuru admitted. "But everyone usually just calls me Chizuru."

"Then maybe they're wrong," suggested Heisuke. "Unless you really are a Chizuru and you just didn't know it."

"That could be it," agreed Shiranui.

Chizuru didn't really think that made any sense, but she wasn't so sure there was much convincing them otherwise. "But what do you do if there is more than one dodo or lory in the same place at the same time?"

Shiranui frowned. "That wouldn't happen."

"Why is that?"

"You'll never find two who are exactly alike," Heisuke explained. "Even Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum are different, and their identical twins!"

"I see. I'll be sure to keep that in mind." Sensing that there was little purpose in continuing this conversation, Chizuru thought to change the subject. "I happen to be searching for the Shinsengumi- or the Queen- or the Hatter. Would either of you know where I might be able to find any of them?"

"I don't know about the Shinesngumi or the Queen," Heisuke began, "but Hatter and I go way back. He's usually in a tea shop down the street. I don't know why you'd want to find him though. He's quite mad."

"I was told he may know where to find the Shinsengumi."

Heisuke frowned. "It is possible, but you may have trouble getting it out of him. As I said before, he's quite mad."

Chizuru nodded. She wanted to ask what the Hatter was so mad about that he would be difficult to talk to, but Chizuru decided that it would not be a very polite thing to do. Instead she made her goodbyes and walked down the street in the direction Heisuke had told her.

It was not long before Chizuru reached the tea shop near the end of the street. It looked to be a functional building with hardly any adornment and a simple green curtain across the entrance. If it was not for the smell of tea coming from the building she may not have recognized it as a tea shop at all.

Chizuru pushed aside the curtain and entered the building. She was rather surprised to find that the tea shop looked relatively normal. The interior was plain wood walls with no decoration to speak of. A number of tables and mats were arranged throughout the building with a counter towards the back wall. Another curtain separated a back area from the main room. The tea shop was sparsely populated with a several chickens, deer, and squirrels filling up two tables. Near the back counter was a fox in a blue and green striped kimono with a purple apron.

"Can I help you miss?" asked the fox. From the fox's voice Chizuru thought it to be female, though as she had never met a talking fox before she really did not have much to compare it to.

"I was hoping that I could speak to Hatter. I was told I could find him here."

"Certainly. He's in the back room. Follow me." The fox led Chizuru through the back curtain and passed another room she suspected was a kitchen of sorts. The back room seemed to be a private dining area with one long table. And this table was currently occupied.

Three familiar faces sat at the long table. There was a man who resembled Yamazaki, though his ears were quite long, brown, and rabbit like. Next to him was a man with two mouse-like ears who looked like Shimada. He seemed to be dozing on and off with his nose submerged in a tea cup. At the head of the table in a large straw hat was a man who looked remarkably like Sanan.

"So it seems our party has an expected guest," said Sanan finishing a cup of tea and pouring himself another.

Yamazaki shook his head. "_Un-_expected."

"Hardly!" disagreed Sanan. "I rather enjoy expecting the unexpected, making this unexpectation an expectation."

The fox turned to Chizuru and bowed. "Excuse me," she said, rather bewildered and shuffled out of the room.

"I'm sorry to intrude," Chizuru bowed.

Sanan smiled. "Not at all. It has been awhile since we've had entertainment."

"Entertainmentâ€¦" Shimada snored into the tea.

"Don't mind him," began Yamazaki. He sleeps nearly as much as he drinks.

Sanan gestured for Chizuru to take a seat at the table. "My name is Hatter, though contrary to my name I do not enjoy making hats. The man over there is the March Hare and the man snoring in his tea is Dormouse," he said, gesturing towards Yamazaki and Shimada respectively. "Now, to whom do we owe the pleasure of this expectedly unexpected guest?"

"My name is Chizuru."

Sanan poured her a cup of tea. "A rather pretty name for a pretty little flower-bird. Or is it bird-flower, I can never quite remember."

"It's flower-bird or a flutterby. They're synonymous," said Yamazaki.

"Yes, of course. I think it would look quite interesting under a microscope," mused Sanan.

Chizuru quite wondered what a microscope was, though she was pretty sure that whatever it was, she would not want to be underneath it. She took a sip of tea. It wasn't nearly as bad as Harada had made it out to be.

"Now, I hardly think you came all this way for tea. Then again, this is a tea shop so if you _did_ come all this way for tea, I really shouldn't be surprised."

"I was told you may know how I can find the Queen, or possibly even the Shinsengumi. You see, I'm quite lost."

Sanan smiled. "We're all lost here."

"Indeed," Yamazaki agreed.

"Why, just the other day I lost my purpose. It was a very confusing experience as I wasn't sure what to do anymore. Fortunately, I found it tucked away beneath a pile of laundry."

Yamazaki nodded. "I found mine underneath a tatami mat."

Chizuru was beginning to think that no one in this world knew how to answer a question. Either that or she had forgotten how to ask one. She wasn't quite sure.

"Under a tatami mat? Sir March Hare I think you may need to keep better track of your purpose."

"I must have wanted to sit on it for awhile. Besides, do you think a pile of laundry is any better?"

"It must have needed a good washing or it wouldn't have been in the laundry." Sanan addressed Chizuru. "That's the problem with losing one's purpose. You tend to forget why you lost it to begin with."

"I'm not sure I ever considered it," said Chizuru.

"I would advise that you do." Yamazaki gestured towards Shimada. "Or you will end up like him."

"Like him?"

"Yes. He forgot if his purpose is to drink tea or to sleep so he tries to do both, neither of which he does to much success."

Shimada lifted his head. "There is an old haiku about a frog jumping into a tea cup, but I'm not very good with syllables."

"Pond, not a tea cup," reminded Yamazaki. "And its five-seven-five."

"A frog jumping into a pond is hardly a novel concept." Sanan grumbled. "Now a frog jumping into a tea cup would surely be worth remarking."

"I do not think that novelty is important in writing a haiku," Yamazaki stated.

"And you're an expert in haiku?" Sanan grumbled.

"No, but neither are you."

"True. But I see no importance in bothering with something so mundane."

"Perhaps you just do not appreciate poetry."

"Perhaps you are too tiresome to appreciate novelty."

"I still fail to see the importance of novelty in a haiku."

"And I fail to see the unimportance of novelty in a haiku." Sanan glared at Yamazaki, who glared back with equal intensity.

Chizuru was feeling quite uncomfortable. She had never written a poem herself, but she was fairly certain they were both missing the point. Regardless, she hardly wished to get into an argument with either of

them. She felt that the best way to diffuse the situation would be to change the subject. "Um, Sanan? About my question. You wouldn't happen to know if-"

"I believe that there is only one way to settle this," said Sanan, completely ignoring Chizuru.

Yamazaki nodded. "Indeed. Though I would have rather avoided it."

"Then lets allow a duel to decide who's right."

"Very well. Name your terms."

"Quick draw or until one has been incapacitated." Sanan turned to Chizuru. "We need you to be our witness and judge."

"But, I can't!"

"You must," said Yamazaki. "Dormouse is in no condition to judge and you are the only other person here."

"But, I-"

"Good," said Sanan, before Chizuru could finish her sentence. "Now, please ready our weapons."

"Huh?"

"Our weapons," he said, pointing at two tea cups. "You can't have us doing it, it wouldn't be fair."

Chizuru was not sure what tea cups had to do with dueling. "I don't understand."

Sanan looked irritated. "We need you to pour the tea into the cups equally and place one in front of each of us at the same distance. This way neither of us has an unfair advantage."

Chizuru wasn't quite sure how to politely refuse participation. Instead, she did as she asked, pouring tea equally into the two cups and placing them before Sanan and Yamazaki.

"You will have to tell us when to begin," Yamazaki stated.

"Right. Um, begin?" As soon as Chizuru spoke both Sanan and Yamazaki reached for their cups, downed the tea, and slammed the cups onto the table. It happened so quickly Chizuru didn't have a chance to blink.

"I believe I have won this duel," said Yamazaki.

Sanan looked at Chizuru. "That is for our judge to decide."

"Well, umâ€¦ I'm really not sureâ€¦"

Yamazaki looked at Chizuru as well. "It is your role as judge. You must make a decision."

Chizuru did not enjoy being placed in such a position. She wasn't

even quite sure what constituted winning this odd duel. "Um, I think Yamazaki slammed his cup down first, soâ€¦ he won?"

Yamazaki bowed. "I thought as much, though the outcome may very well have been different had your hand not been injured."

Sanan shook his head. "We cannot always control our circumstances in battle."

Chizuru was quite happy that the extent of the duel was tea drinking rather than sword fighting, though she felt quite bewildered at being put up to judging the duel so suddenly. Now that the duel was over she contemplated asking Sanan again for direction, but before she could get a chance another guest arrived.

"I apologize for the intrusion," said the guest. Chizuru recognized the voice and when she turned to look she saw, once again, the person who looked like Saito."

"White Rabbit, it's been awhile," smiled Sanan.

"It has not been particularly long," Saito replied.

"Nonsense. It's been at least a month."

"Three days."

"Three days, a month, semantics. But, no matter." Sanan waived his hand to the side. "In any case, what business does the Queen's hand have with me this time?"

"The Queen requests your assistance with a matter of state. There will be need of your tea."

"And who is on trial this time?"

Saito eyed Chizuru before responding. "The Knave."

"I see. Then I shall prepare."

"And I will take my leave." Saito bowed and left the room.

Immediately after Saito exited the room, Sanan took off his hat and began placing objects from the table into his hat. The cups and plates overflowed from the hat and crashed to the floor. Yamazaki picked up a broom from the corner of the room and began sweeping up the mess.

Chizuru turned to Shimada, as he was the only one in the room who wasn't doing anything in particular. "Excuse me."

"You're excused," he dribbled.

"Um, I realize this is rather presumptuous of me, but do you think it would be possible for me to come with you? I need to see the Queen."

Sanan paused. "Possible, but hardly practical."

"Indeed," concurred Yamazaki.

"Then, is there any chance you can tell me where I must go to find the Queen?"

"I certainly should. It would be rather odd if I couldn't tell you where to go when I work for the Queen, don't you think?"

"I suppose so."

"Then again, it is possible that I could find my way on instinct alone, which would suggest that while I arrive at my location, I hardly know how I get there."

"Do you find your way by instinct?" asked Chizuru, though she felt it to be a rather silly question.

"Not particularly, or not usually, I think."

"Then you could tell me where to go?"

"I believe you are very nearly there," Sanan stated. "Though, you are also quite far. It's all relative."

"I'm not sure I follow."

"You might want to figure that out then. It would be difficult to get anywhere if you are not sure if you are doing the following or doing the going."

"I meant that I do not understand your directions."

"About distance? The shortest distance between two points is a straight line, but it's not necessarily the quickest. Though it hardly matters, all roads lead to your destination, you see."

"Yes, I think I have heard that before."

"Well, it is good advice. No matter where you go, there you are."

"I'm still not sure I understand it though."

"That hardly matters. Do you need to understand how the flutterby glows for you to use the light?"

"Um, well--"

"Exactly."

"I apologize, I'm just very confused."

"I noticed you do that a lot."

"Do what?"

"Be confused. If you spent less time confused and more time going you'd probably have found your way by now. Unless or course your way was entirely lost. You'd have to wait until it was found again before your continue on your way."

Chizuru was beginning to wish that she too made little sense. Perhaps than she could understand what everyone else was talking about. "I think I will try your suggestion and not bother with understanding." She thought she probably wouldn't be able to understand anyway.

"Excellent. Now off you go."

"But -"

"I have places to be. Shoo."

Chizuru quickly bowed and left the building, smiling politely as she passed the fox waitress. She walked a good bit away from the tea shop before she allowed herself to take in this last meeting. She could barely keep up with the oddities she encountered. Yet, there was hardly anything to do about it but press forward.

4. Chapter 4

Chizuru continued towards the other end of the village, as it was the only thing she could think to do. And while it was not long before she reached the village exit she hadn't gotten very far into the outskirts when she was interrupted.

"You, come over here."

Chizuru blinked. Sitting on top of a broken wall was a man who looked strikingly similar to Kazama.

"Umâ€¦ Yes?"

"You look familiar."

"I-I do?" Chizuru was quite surprised and not altogether happy.

"Yes, you do. You must be an egg."

"Huh?"

"An egg. You must be an egg."

"I'm not an egg. I'm a person." Though she was rather relieved he didn't remember her, she thought that to be a silly thought indeed.

"Ridiculous. If you were a filthy human, you wouldn't look like an egg."

"What about me doesn't look human?"

Kazama scoffed. "I do not deign to note the traits of peasants. They are not worthy of my time."

"I see." Though she really didn't.

Kazama stood up and began pacing back and forth along the wall. "It's

not every day that I meet another egg."

"I really don't think I'm an egg. And isn't that kind of dangerous? You could fall."

"As if I'd fall," Kazama smirked, but chose to stop pacing anyway. "And I'm not so fragile that I'd need the entire kingdom to come to my aid if I did fall."

Chizuru had a sense of unease as he spoke, yet she was eluded as to the cause. "So, my name is Chizuru, what's yours?"

"Humpty Dumpty."

Chizuru wondered how she should continue. "Um, I'm looking for the Queen, or the Shinsengumi. You wouldn't by any chance know where I could find either?"

"Matters of court are beneath me. I care little for the day-to-day dealings of commoners." Kazama stared at her. Her unease grew.

Chizuru fidgeted. "Wellâ€¦ thenâ€¦ I suppose I should be goingâ€¦"

"You're really very irritating."

"Huh!"

Kazama jumped off of the wall looking rather disgusted. "You just assume I don't mind if you leave."

"But-"

"It's inconsiderate."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize, it's unsightly."

Chizuru felt very flustered. This version of Kazama seemed very contradictory. "Um, okay. Then I'm not sorry?"

"Now you're being inconsistent. Have some conviction."

"I'll try to keep that in mind."

"Ridiculous." He paused for a moment then looked at her again as though you would a display of fabric before you decided which to buy. It was very unnerving. "It's not every day that I meet another egg."

Chizuru stared at her feet, unsure of what to do. "Yes, you mentioned that."

"Have you considered mating?"

"Huh!"

"I'd like to have children. At least a dozen. Or perhaps a baker's

dozen."

Chizuru backed away several steps. "I- I don't think I'm ready to have children."

"Really? You look fully developed to me."

Chizuru blushed, "It's not, well, I mean I don't want to have kids yet."

"You amuse me. And you're an egg. I think you should reconsider."

"But I'm not an egg. And I don't want to have children yet."

Kazama frowned, "Than what use are you to me?" Though she wasn't sure he was talking to her.

Chizuru thought now would be an excellent time to try to move on her way again before Kazama changed his mind. "So, would it bother you if I was to leave?"

"Hardly. If you are not going to provide me with a dozen children you're really of no value to me."

Chizuru exhaled. She quickly said goodbye and practically ran down the street.

Chizuru traversed the road for quite some time without incident. She thought it rather nice that she was given a moment of peace, though it allowed her all too much time to think. She was still very concerned that she would not be able to find the Shinsengumi or even the queen. It seemed that this strange world was doing everything it could to impede her.

While she mulled over her situation it occurred to her that the sun had finally deemed fit to set and it had gotten quite dark. She had a moment of panic at the prospect of pressing on in the dark, but she found this world to be oddly bright at night. It seemed the stars (and it was quite comforting that there were stars indeed!) were much brighter than those of her world. She noted that the moon was absent from the sky, or perhaps there was no moon here at all. As time passed she realized that like the sun, the stars were not stationary. The stars looked like fireflies buzzing around in the night sky.

It occurred to Chizuru that she really ought to be tired. She thought she might try to find a safe place to sleep, but figured with all that happened this past day she wouldn't be able to get much rest anyway. Instead she chose to press forward.

It was not long before the sun decided to rise again. She figured the sun couldn't have been down for more than a couple of hours before it had decided to rise. She thought it to be rather conceited of the sun to not allow the stars much time in the sky. Then, realizing what she had just wondered, she wondered when she had begun to allow herself to wonder such ridiculous wonders.

Before Chizuru could spend much time considering her own sanity, she found herself at the foot of a rather large and beautiful garden. As most things in this world, the garden wasn't quite what she was used

to. It was designed mostly of flowery hedges and plum trees arranged in a spiral pattern. She noted that the leaves appeared to have an odd leathery quality about them. The flowers too seemed a bit off. Looking closer she noticed that they were crafted from origami paper.

In the distance beyond the garden Chizuru saw what she thought to be a mansion fit for a Shogun. _Perhaps the Queen lives there!_ she thought. It certainly was grand enough for someone so important.

Chizuru decided to traverse the spiral garden, hoping that at the other end was her destination. After entering the garden she noted that hedges seemed taller and the mansion further away than she had initially thought. She lost her footing several times while navigating the garden. It almost felt as though the garden itself did not want her to continue. She decided that was an idea best to ignore.

When Chizuru reached what she thought to be the halfway point in the garden she encountered a group of gentlemen who, judging by their armor, appeared to be soldiers of a sort. There were two donned in bright red armor and two in black. A small pile of origami flowers lay on the ground beside them.

"East!" shouted a man in red.

"West!" yelled another in black.

A second man in red shook his head. "The flowers must face the sunrise."

The second in black balled his hands into fists. "Which is in the west."

"It rises in the East," argued the first in red, shoving a finger into the second in black's chest.

The first in black sighed. "We don't have time to argue. East or west we need to replace these flowers before the Queen realizes we're missing from sword practice."

"Agreed," stated the second in red. "But this still begs the question, should we place them towards the east, or the west?"

"East!" shouted the first in red.

"West!" yelled the second in black.

Chizuru did not want to interfere in their conversation, but she thought it may be better to do so than not as they seemed to be in dire need of help. "What if you placed them in the same direction of all the other flowers on the other hedges?"

The first in red's eyes widened, "preposterous!"

"Ridiculous!" the second in black snarled. "And who do you think you are to give advice to the Queen's army!"

"I'm sorry!" Chizuru bowed. "You seemed like you needed help."

"The Queens guard does not need help," the second in red growled.

"Wait," began the first in black. "This little flower may have a point. As a flower, she may know what is best."

The four men pushed and shoved each other into a huddle. For a moment Chizuru thought she saw more arms in the huddle than there should have been. After a few minutes they seemed to come to some agreement.

"It is decided," stated the first in black. "We will listen to the flower." The four men preceded to arrange the pile of origami flowers on the hedge in the same pattern as the other flowers on the other hedges.

After they had finished arranging the flowers, the first in black walked over to Chizuru. "We thank you for your assistance."
"

"Certainly," she said. "By the way, I'm looking for the Shinsengumi, or the Queen. Would you happen to know where I could find either?"

"You are, in fact, speaking to a member of the Queen's guard. We could take you to the mansion."

"I couldn't ask you to do so much for me!"

"We would be honored to help you. After all, you have done us a great service."

"I only gave you a bit of advice."

"The quantity of advice matters less than the quality."

Chizuru bowed. "Thank you very much! I am in your care."

With the help of the four soldiers it was not long until Chizuru reached the entrance to the mansion. Up close it was far grander then she had initially realized.

The four soldiers led her into the mansion and through a number of halls and rooms. The inside of the mansion was rather simple for the home of someone so important, yet there was a regal feel about it just the same.

"We are here," said the first in black, stopping in front of a large doorway. "There is a trial going on right now, so you won't be able to meet with the Queen until after. The trial is open to the public, so you may as well watch while you wait."

When the soldiers told her the Queen was preceding over court, she was not entirely sure what to expect. Yet, what she saw was entirely out of her expectation.

There was a man, or perhaps a women, who looked very much like her running back and forth across a field of bright green. She thought

perhaps he was Kaoru, or at least some incarnation of her. He appeared to be chasing after a small green ball with some sort of stick that opened into a circle at the top with a net drawn taut over it. Across from him and separated by a net of sorts was a man resembling Kondo clad in red and black. He too was running around the field of green with the odd stick. They seemed to be hitting the ball back and forth to each other.

There were tatami mats set up on either side of the field. Ten people in total lined the mats to the side closest to her. She recognized immediate two of the people; Sanan and Yamazaki, who in this strange land fashioned themselves Hatter and March Hare. She thought she may have recognized two more faces sitting rather close to them. There was a woman dressed in a lavish kimono who looked remarkably like Sen. Next to her was the likeness of Kimigiku, though dressed far more modestly.

What Chizuru found the most interesting was on the side of the field furthest from her. Sitting on a wooden dais was Hijikata, or at least, someone who looked very much like Hijikata. His clothing was by far the most regal she had ever seen. Dressed in layers of patterned silks in blacks, reds, and whites he looked more like a nobleman than the militant man she remembered. Standing next to him on the ground below the dais was Saito, who in this world preferred the title White Rabbit.

"Curious and curiouser," she whispered, somewhat louder than intended. Though perhaps it was much louder than she intended as once the words left her mouth Kaoru swung his stick and missed the ball. One of the two events must have garnered some attention as the room grew suddenly quite.

The silence lasted just long enough for Chizuru to begin to feel uncomfortable. She was wondering if she should take a seat by the twelve or perhaps leave the room all together when Hijikata broke the silence.

"Guilty," he stated in a tone that reflected his years of commanding others.

Kaoru dropped his stick and pointed angrily at Hijikata. "What the hell do you mean guilty? The score's 20-30?"

"20-30 or 20-40 it makes no difference. If I say you're guilty, you're guilty."

"My Queen," Kondo interjected. "Allow the Knave and I to see this battle to the end like true men!"

"King, as you know there is little use in continuing a battle that is already decided," said Saito.

Kondo shook his head, "But the battle has not been decided yet."

"If the Queen of Hearts wills that the battle is decided, the battle is decided."

"As you say," frowned Kondo, crestfallen. "But who will take the Knave of Hearts place after he commits seppuku? A full court is necessary for a flush, especially one of a royal nature."

"I will not commit Seppuku," growled Kaoru.

Sen rose from her mat. "Perhaps we should ask the flutterby Alice. She looks enough like the Knave."

"The Duchess has the right of it," said Sanan, who appeared to be mixing in a strange red liquid into a cup of tea.

Kaoru seethed, "I will not be replaced."

"Indeed," Hijikata nodded, continuing to ignore Kaoru. "We shall require of this Alice to replace the Knave at court. Hatter. March Hare. Remove the Knave and make him drink tea."

"As you will," smiled Sanan, rising from his seat. Kaoru bolted for the door and made it very near Chizuru before Sanan and Yamazaki caught him by the arms. The two men dragged the struggling Kaoru out the door. A stream of curses were the last thing Chizuru heard before the doors slammed shut behind them.

"I would have thought he would accept his fate with more dignity, but no matter. Alice, come." The man who looked like Hijikata stared directly at her.

She looked left and right to make sure there was no one else he could be staring at before pointing at herself and asking, "Me?"

"Yes, you," he snapped, "do you know anyone else by the name of Alice?"

"But I-"

"Impudence!"

"Sorry!" Chizuru bowed. Hijikata had always been somewhat intimidating, but this seemed quite outlandish to her.

"Are you going to approach or am I going to have to drag you up here?"

"Sorry," Chizuru repeated and scampered up before dais.

"May I inspect her, your majesty?" asked Sen.

Hijikata nodded, "As you will."

Sen glided over to Chizuru and proceeded to look her over. She walked around her several times. She raised each arm, looked at her fingernails, and allowed her arms to drop back to her side. Whatever she was looking for she must have found it for she soon turned to Hijikata and stated, "She does not appear malnourished, maltreated, or with malady, though perhaps a bit maladapted."

"So then," asked the Kondo, "will you join us at court?"

"She has too," said Hijikata. "We will give her no other choice."

Kondo's eyes widened, "My Queen, is that wise?"

"Indeed," agreed Saito. "She may be burdensome. We do not have time to babysit little girls."

"You could always just kill her," suggested a voice from an invisible personage.

Sen looked to the direction of the voice. "Cheshire Cat. How many times does the court have to remind you that addressing the Queen of Hearts invisibly is very rude?"

"My apologies Duchess," Said Okita, making himself visible beginning with his smile and eyes and working his way down to his toes.

"Should we not establish her purpose before we execute her?" asked Saito.

"Huh!" Chizuru flushed. She was very unsure as to why they were suddenly talking about killing her and it brought back far too many unpleasant memories."

"Agreed," said Hijikata. "Alice. What is your purpose?"

"My purpose?"

"That is what I just said."

Chizuru breathed deeply, "I came in search of the Shinsengumi. It was suggested to me that I should seek out the Queen of Hearts to find them." There was a long silence once she finished speaking. She thought perhaps they were waiting for her to say something else, but she was far from sure what to say. Instead, she chose to stare at her feet.

Chizuru had come to the conclusion that there was entirely nothing remarkable about her feet when Hijikata spoke. "We must decide on the method of her execution."

Chizuru tensed. "But, why? What did I do?"

"You are an imposter," said Saito.

Sen nodded, "I should have noticed when I examined you."

"There's no need for this," Kondo shook his head.

"Hardly," scoffed Hijikata. "She is a falsehood. Any true Alice would have known the Shinsengumi vanished years ago."

It was at that moment that Chizuru realized she had nothing left. She had clung to the idea of finding those she had come to care about. It was the one piece of sanity that remained to her in this nonsense world. She hadn't even considered what she would do if s

"I did warn you, you know," a warm voice whispered in her ear. "'The Queen is a demon' I said. But seeing as you're Very Confused I suppose I can hardly be surprised."

"It is time," the Queen spoke, drawing a sword from its scabbard.

It all happened before Chizuru had a chance to react or even feel scared for what was to come. The hands that grabbed her, the blade, the basket, the feel of the pillow beneath her cheek, and the sound. There was a quiet sound the blade made as it cut through the air. Another sound altogether when it reached her neck. But no pain. She felt nothing as it happened. There was no darkness either. _Shouldn't there be darkness in death_, she wondered. And there was a quick movement and she was staring at her headless body. _I am floating_, she thought. But then she saw the basket, and to her surprise she did not see her head in the basket. She wondered where her head could have gone off to, leaving her body behind like that. She looked directly below and saw a pair of feet, _but they are not my feet!_

"Do you find it strange, being dead?" asked Okita's voice.

"I had always imagined it to be darker," she found herself saying. _Speaking!_ "Am I a ghost?"

"Well, to be fair you're more of a head than a ghost."

"Indeed," said the voice connected to the feet below her. "It is the Queen's wish that you be the principle factor in the next session of court," Saito continued.

Chizuru found herself, or rather, her head, being passed to Kondo who stood once again on the field of green wielding the strange stick. It was Sen this time who faced him holding a similar stick that was just as peculiar. She heard the sound of a whistle and felt her self being tossed into the air. As she came back down she felt herself being hit with the strange stick and across the field she flew, passed the net and straight into the stick that Sen held. Back and forth she flew from stick to stick as the two sent her head flying across the field of green. Dizzier and dizzier she grew until she was not longer sure if she was flying to or from or up or down or left or right. And then it slowed and she saw the grass again. There was not stick, no one to send her back across the field. Closer and closer the grass came. She closed her eyes. And waited.

She felt the warmth of a blanket being placed over her shoulders. She opened her eyes. It was dark outside now and the wind pushed aside the heat of the day.

"I didn't mean to wake you," Inoue said.

Chizuru realized he must have been the one who covered her with the blanket. "No, thank you for bringing me the blanket."

"Now that you're awake, you may as well go inside. The days may be hot, but the nights are still cool enough to make you sick."

And then Chizuru remembered the dream and all that had happened.

"You looked troubled."

Chizuru shook her head. "No. I was just thinking. It's good to be home."

End
file.